



# The Human Services Workforce Initiative

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

## *Finding Our Strength: Boston's Youth Worker Survey Findings*



Prepared by  
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for Cornerstones for Kids

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By Julie Dennehy,  
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*A research brief of the Next Generation Youth Work Coalition*

## **Acknowledgements**

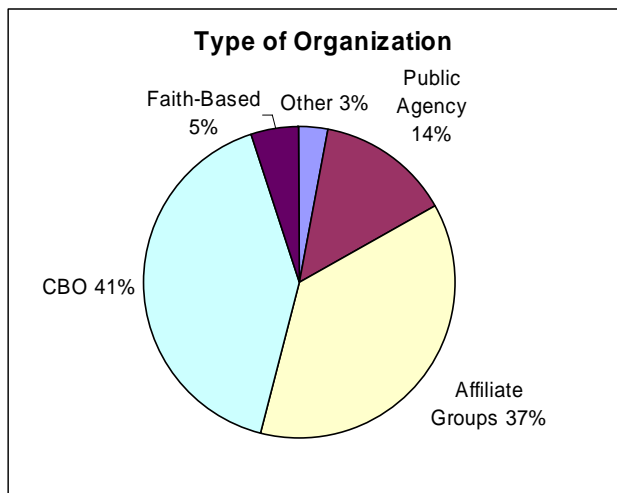
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This report is one of a series of briefs being developed by the Next Generation Youth Work Coalition about the youth work workforce. The Coalition brings together individuals and organizations dedicated to developing a strong, diverse youth work workforce that is stable, prepared, supported, and committed to the wellbeing and empowerment of young people. These research briefs are available on the Cornerstones for Kids Web site, [www.cornerstones4kids.org](http://www.cornerstones4kids.org).

## Finding Our Strength Boston's Youth Worker Survey Findings<sup>1</sup>

Finding Our Strength Youth Worker Survey of Boston is a collaborative effort of Achieve Boston partners—led by The Medical Foundation BEST Initiative, the National Institute on Out of School Time of the Wellesley Centers for Women, and Boston After School & Beyond. The study was supported with funding from the Boston Foundation and Cornerstones for Kids, through a partnership with the Forum for Youth Investment and the Next Generation Youth Work Coalition. The study is designed to increase the collective knowledge of Boston's youth workers—who they are, how they are supported in the workplace—and what it will take to attract, develop, and sustain youth workers in the future. The study includes a comprehensive survey and two focus groups of Boston's youth workers. For the purposes of this survey, “youth workers” are defined as individuals who work with or on behalf of youth between the ages of 13 and 19 in the city of Boston.

In all, 316 surveys were returned from the intended population. The majority of respondents are full-time paid youth worker staff (66 percent). An additional 25 percent of respondents are volunteers, and 9 percent are paid part-time workers. Over half of the respondents (54 percent) spend most of their time working directly with youth; an additional one-quarter (26 percent) spend more than half-time working directly with youth. However, about one-in-ten of the respondents spend little or no time working directly with youth; these respondents are in administration in youth programs. Eighty-one percent of respondents work year round, 52 percent of respondents work a typical 9-5 schedule, and 42 percent work afternoon/evening hours.



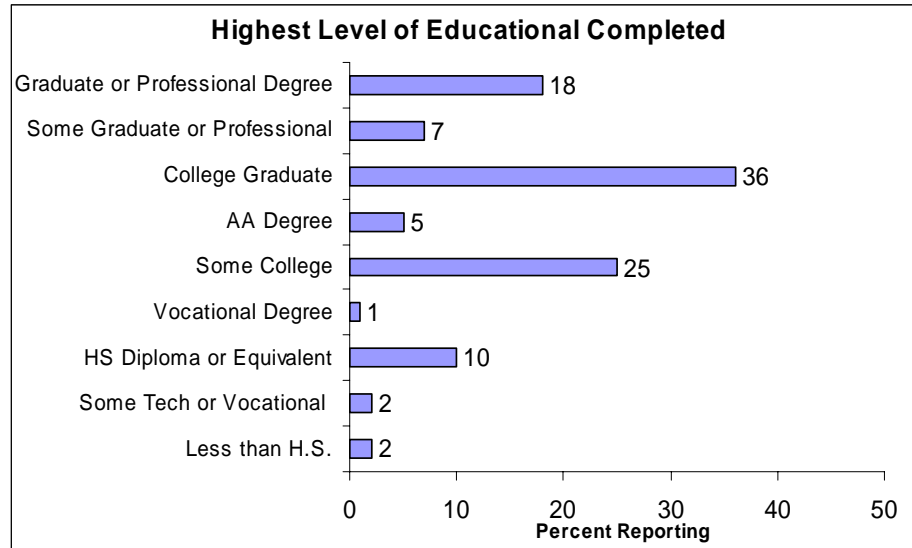
The largest group of survey respondents (41 percent) works in community-based organizations (CBOs); the second largest group (37 percent) works in local or regional affiliates of national nonprofits such as YMCAs, Boys & Girls Clubs, etc. (referred to as Affiliate groups). About half of respondents (48 percent) work in programs that provide multiple services (multi-service agencies) and serve children and youth of all ages (53 percent). Fifty percent of respondents work in organizations that focus their services on low-income populations only; 35 percent provide services primarily for low- and middle-income populations.

**The survey respondents represent a diverse youth worker population.** Sixty-seven percent (n=202) of respondents are female; 33 percent (n=101) are male. Approximately 31 percent of respondents are ages 22-25 years; however, 52 percent of respondents are over 25 years old. Fifty one percent of respondents are Caucasian; 28.5 percent are black or of African descent; and 13.5 percent describe themselves as Hispanic. This racial diversity closely matches that of the city of Boston according to the 2000 U.S. Census.

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<sup>1</sup> Watch for a corresponding series of fact sheets about workforce description, retention/recruitment/satisfaction and program delivery/context that are forthcoming on the Achieve Boston Web site, [www.achieveboston.org](http://www.achieveboston.org).

**Overall, the respondents appear to be an educated group that actively participates in ongoing training opportunities.** The vast majority of youth workers have participated in training recently, 75 percent in the last six months. Sixty-one percent of respondents have a BA degree or higher. Many of these degrees (34 percent) are in out-of-school time related fields. Furthermore, 21 percent of respondents are currently pursuing higher education. Twenty-four percent of respondents report having a BEST certificate. However, staff who work most closely with youth are less likely to have higher levels of education. Over two-thirds (71 percent) of non-degreed staff work most of their time with youth, and 90 percent of non-degreed staff spend half or more of their time in direct care of youth.



**Many youth organizations provide supports for ongoing training.** Sixty-three percent of respondents report that their organization pays the training fees for youth workers to attend training, and 50 percent provide information about training opportunities. In addition, 35 percent of respondents report that their organization provides release time for workers to attend training; 63 percent of respondents report that their organization provides on-the-job training; and 44 percent of respondents report learning “a lot” or “almost everything” about how to do their job from other experienced staff members or colleagues. However, other employee incentives are lacking, as only 25 percent of respondents report that their organization rewards higher education attainment and far fewer (8 percent) reward certification. Furthermore, 36 percent of respondents report that they “do not know” about any hiring or promotion incentives, identifying a possibly disturbing trend: these opportunities do not exist or employees are not informed about these opportunities in their own organizations.

Many respondents report receiving supportive supervision and being involved in the decision making of the program—40 percent report always receiving support and feedback from supervisors, and 56 percent report often or always being involved in the decision making and direction of programming.

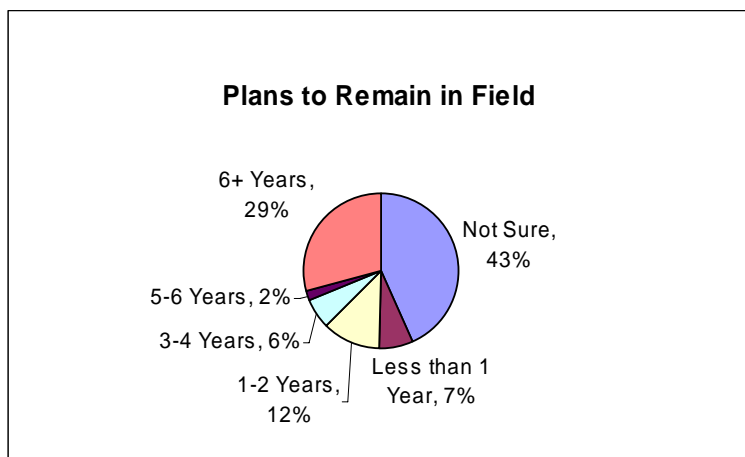
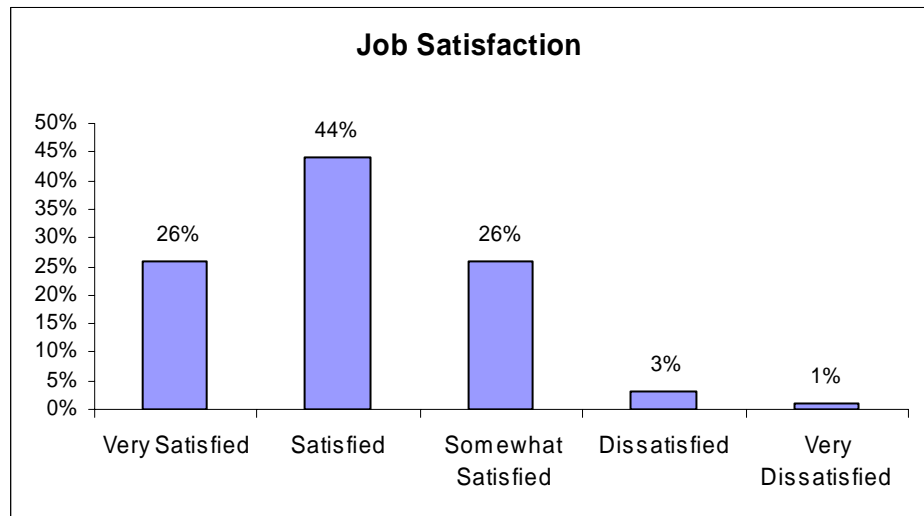
**Job mobility appears high.** The majority of respondents (46 percent) have worked in their current position for less than one year, and an additional 19 percent have been in their position for less than two years. However, 44 percent of respondents report five or more years of paid work experience with youth overall. In addition, 25 percent of respondents report five or more years of volunteer experience in the field.

**Job satisfaction appears high, but intent to stay in the field is lower.** Seventy-two percent of respondents report that they strongly agree with the statement, “I get a lot of personal enjoyment out of working with youth.” The majority of respondents are satisfied (44 percent) or very satisfied (26 percent) with their current job/volunteer position. However, approximately one-third of workers report some dissatisfaction with their current work situation.

Despite respondents stated enjoyment and satisfaction with their work, 19 percent of respondents report that they plan to stay in the field for less than two years, and a full 43 percent report they do not know how long they plan to stay in the field.

The results of this survey suggest a profile of the youth worker who is more satisfied

and more likely to stay in the field: a worker who is older, with more education, who has been in the field or in her/his current position longer, and, in the case of intention to stay, who receives a higher salary. In contrast, the profile of the worker who is less satisfied and less likely to stay in the field is one who is younger, has less education, is newer to the field, and receives a lower salary.



When respondents were asked directly what factors would influence their decision to stay in the field, 49 percent report that wages would make a difference, and 32 percent report that “The fit between my personal interests and career opportunities and the field” would make a difference. This is consistent with the profiles we have drawn above; younger workers and those new to the field may not have decided to focus on a career in youth work; workers with more education who can command higher salaries are

more likely to stay. Respondents also felt that raising wages is the single factor that would help most to advance the youth work profession, endorsed by 72 percent of respondents, followed by public recognition of the youth work field (40 percent) and more career advancement opportunities with clearer pathways (35 percent).

Watch for additional findings from Finding Our Strength in a series of forthcoming fact sheets on the Achieve Boston web site, [www.achieveboston.org](http://www.achieveboston.org).